

27 April 1987

Bush Role in Recruiting Contra Aid Figure Doubted

By DOYLE McMANUS, Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON—A key figure in the secret airlift that aided Nicaraguan rebels during 1985 and 1986 was apparently recruited by then-White House aide Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, not by Vice President George Bush, sources familiar with the *contra* scandal investigations said Sunday.

Felix Rodriguez, a former CIA operative who helped direct the *contra* airlift's operations at El Salvador's Ilopango air base, initially went to Central America with the help of a Bush aide, Donald P. Gregg, the sources said. But Rodriguez has told congressional investigators that it was North, not Gregg, who asked him to help the *contras*, they said.

Investigators have also obtained a letter, apparently written by North in 1985, asking Rodriguez to

help with the *contra* airlift and warning him not to tell anyone of the plan.

Gregg said Sunday that the new evidence confirms the contention of Bush and his aides that they were not directly involved in the *contra* airlift, which North directed despite a congressional ban on U.S. aid to the rebels during 1985 and 1986.

The charges of involvement in the Iran-*contra* scandal have dogged Bush as he has prepared to run for President in the 1988 election.

The charges first arose last fall when associates of Rodriguez told reporters that Rodriguez said he had met with Bush and had been conducting operations against the Nicaraguan government from El Salvador with the vice president's knowledge and approval.

"The accusations have been that the vice president or I have been running *contra* operations," Gregg said in a telephone interview. "This shows that those accusations are false. . . . The fact is, the only time I talked to Felix about this thing was when he came to me to blow the whistle on some people involved in the supply operation."

Gregg said Rodriguez did not tell him about the airlift until August, 1986, even though the two men were longtime friends.

"Felix and I were trained as intelligence officers," he said. "We believe in the need-to-know principle, and I didn't need to know.... When Felix finally came to me, he said: 'Don, I really hate to tell you this, because Ollie [North] asked me not to talk about it.'"

Bay of Pigs Veteran

Rodriguez, a veteran of the CIA's abortive Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961, went to El Salvador in early 1985 to advise the Salvadoran air force on operations against leftist guerrillas, according to Gregg and other associates of Rodriguez.

Later that year, North and retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord began organizing a new airlift operation for the *contras*. The Nicaraguan rebels' main air base was in Honduras, but North and Secord wanted to use El Salvador's main air base as well, partly because Honduran authorities were restricting *contra* operations there, U.S. officials said.

The letter obtained by investigators, dated Sept. 20, 1985, asks Rodriguez to seek the approval of El Salvador's air force chief, Gen. Juan Rafael Bustillo, for the airlift's use of Ilopango, according to one source who has seen a copy.

"Dear Felix," the letter says, "After reading this letter please destroy it. . . . Within the next 15 days, the [*contras*] air arm will commence operations with two new types of aircraft . . . for airdrop/aerial resupply to units inside Nicaragua.

"Since this is a completely compartmentalized operation being handled by the resistance, you are the only person in the area who can set up the servicing of these aircraft," the letter says.

Rodriguez and Bustillo both agreed, and the *contra* airlift began using Ilopango as one of its main staging points.

Rodriguez, using the name "Max Gomez," ran the Ilopango operation from a safe house in San Salvador, where his office displayed a prominent photograph of Vice President Bush, associates said.

Washington," recalled Iain Crawford, a crewman on several of the secret flights. "He said he had known Bush from when he [Bush] was director of the CIA."

Rodriguez Gave Warning

Last Aug. 8, Gregg said, Rodriguez came to Washington to warn him that all was not well with the airlift operation.

"Some of it, he thought, smelled to high heaven," Gregg recalled. "He was afraid these guys [running the operation] would either take the money and run, or—worse—somehow make themselves attractive enough to get hired by the CIA when Congress restored funding for the Nicaraguan resistance.

"He wanted to warn the CIA not to touch them with a 10-foot pole," Gregg said.

A few days later, Gregg set up a meeting between Rodriguez and officials from the CIA, the State Department and the NSC to relay the message, he said.

Last Oct. 5, one of the airlift's planes was shot down by Nicaraguan forces. To inform the White House, Rodriguez telephoned Gregg's deputy, Army Col. Sam Watson.

After the crash, The Times and other newspapers discovered Rodriguez's link to Gregg. At the time, Gregg said he had never discussed the *contra* airlift with Rodriguez, but on Sunday he said: "That was a bad answer, because on one occasion Felix came to me and talked about it"—a reference to the August meetings.

Rodriguez also met with Bush three times during the period when the *contra* airlift was operating, but both Bush and Gregg said the *contra* issue did not come up.

North's direct involvement in the *contra* airlift during the period when Congress banned U.S. aid to the rebels has been well documented. His reported letter recruiting Rodriguez was dated only eight days after his superior, then-National Security Adviser Robert C. McFarlane, wrote to a member of Congress that no NSC funds were being spent for "supporting directly or indirectly paramilitary operations in Nicaragua."

Gregg said Sunday that he had gone to Bush twice to offer his resignation: first in December, after his link to Rodriguez was revealed, and again last month when the issue was raised again.

"I felt the vice president was being unfairly attacked," he said. "But he was superb. His response was: 'Hang in there.' He was always convinced that the true story would come out."